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SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: GAZA UPDATE JANUARY 14, 2009, 1300 LOCAL

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11. (SBU) Summary. Israeli military operations continued January 13-14, with heavy fighting occurring in and around Gaza City. Airstrikes targeted the northern Gaza Strip and the Rafah border area. Gaza-based medical sources reported as many as 976 Palestinians dead and 4,418 wounded since hostilities began. A "humanitarian pause" is scheduled from 1300-1600 local. Two Palestinians were shot and killed in the West Bank. End summary.

IDF Operations Encircle Gaza City

12. (SBU) Gaza-based sources, local press, and the UN reported that the IDF continued operations on the outskirts of Gaza City January 13-14, as heavy fighting in northern, southern, and eastern neighborhoods killed at least ten militants and six unidentified Palestinians, and injured dozens of others. Having advanced several hundred meters into the neighborhoods of Tel al-Hawa and Tel al-Islam (southwestern Gaza City) IDF troops withdrew after heavy fighting on the afternoon of January 13, leaving behind substantial damage to commercial and residential buildings. Fighting continued January 14 in Zaytun (southern Gaza City), Tuffah (eastern Gaza City), and Twam, Shaykh Radwan, and Karama (northern Gaza City). IDF troops ransacked houses and fired on locals, according to Gaza-based press. Israeli press reported that the Paratroopers Brigade Battalion 890 was operating in northern Gaza City.

13. (SBU) Gaza-based sources and press reported that the IAF struck several targets in Gaza City January 14, including Palestine Square (the main square in the city center) and al-Mukhtar Street. Targets included weapons storage facilities and rocket launching areas. Palestinians fleeing conflict areas did not know which neighborhoods of Gaza City would be safe, making it difficult for them to find shelter, according to Gaza-based sources.

Fighting Continues in Northern Gaza

14. (SBU) Gaza-based press and the UN reported that fighting continued January 13-14 in the northern Gaza cities of Bayt Lahiya, Bayt Hanun, and Jabaliya, killing at least 13 militants. Palestinians in Jabaliya reported constant airstrikes during the afternoon of January 13, which killed at least three Palestinians and injured at least 21. In one incident, the IAF killed two Palestinians traveling by cart in al-Falluja, west of Jablaliya, and wounded three others. Airstrikes in the Jabaliya refugee camp killed seven and wounded an estimated 40 Palestinians the afternoon of January 13, according to Gaza-based press.

Fighting Intensifies in Southern Gaza

15. (SBU) Gaza-based sources reported that the IDF clashed with militants on the outskirts of Khan Yunis and in Abasan, killing at least one. Mayor of Abasan al-Kibira Mustafa al-Shawaf told ConGen that a third of Abasan's residents have moved in with family in Khan

Yunis or to UNRWA shelters. He said water lines repaired January 12 were destroyed again January 13, leaving much of the town without water.

¶6. (SBU) Heavy fighting and IAF airstrikes in Khuza'a (east of Khan Yunis) killed a total of 11, including three militants, a 75-year old man, a woman, and two children. Director of the Khuza'a Agricultural Center Abdul Halim Qudayah told ConGen that over 4,000 of Khuza'a's 11,000 inhabitants have fled to Khan Yunis and Bani Suhayla in search of safety. At least 80 homes have been destroyed and roughly 150 others damaged by IDF shelling and IAF airstrikes, he said, and hundreds of dunums of agricultural land in Gaza's "bread basket" have been burnt.

¶7. (SBU) Press reported that IAF airstrikes targeted an estimated 55 smuggling tunnels along the Rafah border area January 13-14. The UN reported that an airstrike injured a cyclist in Khuza'a, and a separate airstrike killed one and wounded ten near Abasan.

IDF Maintains Positions Throughout Gaza

¶8. (SBU) The UN reported that the IDF maintained positions near the Erez crossing, near al-Zahra village (northwest of the Nusayrat refugee camp), east of Johr al-Dik (northeast of al-Burayj), near Abu al-Ajeen (east of Dayr al-Balah), and east of the Rafah airport on January 14. No fighting was reported in these locations. The IDF continued to control the Karni-Netzarim Road, separating southern Gaza from the north.

Rockets Continue

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¶9. (SBU) Press reported at least three rockets fired into Israel from Gaza on January 14 as of 1300 local, with no reported casualties. Press reported 18-20 rockets from Gaza landed in Israel on January 13, causing no casualties. This is the lowest number of rockets fired in a single day since the beginning of the Israeli operation in Gaza, probably because Israeli control of launching areas in northern Gaza has disrupted militants' ability to fire rockets.

Casualties

¶10. (SBU) Gaza-based medical sources told the press that a total of 27-30 Palestinians died January 13-14. The sources estimated that 976 Palestinians have been killed since IDF operations began (including at least 311 children, 93 women, 13 paramedics, and three journalists), that 4,418 people have required medical treatment for injuries (including at least 1,549 children and 652 women), and more than 460 of the injured are in critical condition. The sources said that the danger to medical staff and the difficulty of extracting the injured from collapsed buildings makes proper evacuation and estimation of casualties difficult.

¶11. (SBU) Israeli press reported that five IDF paratroopers were wounded, two moderately and three lightly, during a gunbattle in northern Gaza the morning of January 14.

Humanitarian Pause

¶12. (SBU) A "humanitarian pause" was scheduled January 14 from 1300-1600 local. UNRWA reported that it is operating 41 emergency shelters housing roughly 38,000 displaced persons as of January 14. The shelters are overcrowded and there continues to be a shortage of blankets, mattresses, hygiene kits, and non-potable water for washing. UNRWA continues to provide one-a-day meals of pita and tinned meat as well as potable water. One shelter in the far northern village of Khalil Uwayda (near Izbet Bayt Hanun) is behind IDF lines and has not been accessible for two days.

Political Developments

¶13. (U) Following a meeting of the PLO Executive Committee on January 13, Yaser Abed Rabbo stated publicly that international forces would be a "protective fence" for Gazans, and would not harm Palestinian interests. He said that all factions must work together. Abed Rabbo said the PLO and the PA will freeze non-emergency projects in order to provide assistance to Gazans, who are facing a "massacre."

¶14. (SBU) Fatah officials said Hamas has rejected the Egyptian ceasefire proposal, including deployment of PASF at the Rafah crossing, and continues to oppose the deployment of international forces in Gaza. Hamas Deputy Political Bureau Chief Musa Abu Marzuq reiterated Hamas' demands regarding a ceasefire (reftel). Fatah PLC member Azzam al-Ahmad urged Abu Marzuq by phone to accept the Egyptian initiative to facilitate an immediate ceasefire, instead of giving Israel more time to achieve its goals.

¶15. (SBU) PA sources said that President Abbas will attend the January 19-20 Economic Arab Summit in Kuwait. A senior PLO official told the Consul General that Abbas will be under pressure to attend an emergency Arab League meeting in Doha on January 16, now that a quorum of Arab League members have announced support for it. Azzam al-Ahmad said the PA rejected Qatar's suggestion to invite Hamas Political Bureau Chief Khalid Mishaal to attend the summit.

West Bank Reaction and Security

¶16. (SBU) Israeli security forces on January 13 shot and killed a Palestinian from the village of Ithna when he attempted to take the gun of a Border Policeman at Tarqumia checkpoint, west of Hebron. A settler from Emmanuel shot and killed a 17-year old Palestinian who allegedly threw rocks at his car east of Qalqiliya. Late on January 13, Palestinians threw a Molotov cocktail at an Israeli car on Route 60, near Bethlehem. The IDF arrested four Palestinians in the Bethlehem and Nablus areas January 13-14.

WALLES